

THE DIRECTOR OF
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

National Intelligence Officers

8 October 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
FROM : [REDACTED] Chairman
National Intelligence Council
SUBJECT : The Cuban-PDRY Threat to Oman

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Attached is a response to your question
on a possible Cuban/PDRY threat to Oman to-
gether with an annotated copy of Ed Luttwak's
piece in Commentary that you cited.

[REDACTED]

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Attachments

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7 OCTOBER 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR: []
Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM: [] A/NIO/NESA []

SUBJECT: Cuban-PDRY Tank Threat to Oman?

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For some years now, Cuba has maintained an advisory relationship with the Marxist regime in Aden. Initially the Cubans were involved primarily with internal security elements but there is evidence that this role has expanded to include placing personnel with regular Army units. Compared with Havana's forces in Africa, the Cuban contingent in South Yemen is small -- about 500 -- and we are uncertain as to how many of these function exclusively in the military sphere. On occasion, larger combat type forces have deployed to Aden from Ethiopia, using Soviet air transport. This demonstrates a clear Soviet capability to introduce similar forces in the future. Thus, it is not completely unreasonable to deduce that Cuba might play some role as one of Moscow's associates for operations in South Arabia. What is less likely is that such a role could be a quick, effective military attack against Oman. This judgment flows from basic considerations underlying all combat operations: terrain, weapons, and leadership. []

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Terrain factors impose daunting constraints upon any armored or mechanized operations against Oman from the PDRY. There is a single, marginally viable avenue of advance which runs roughly from Habarut northeast toward Muscat, a distance of nearly 700 miles (Berlin-Kiev). In many areas, tracked vehicles could not stray far from the roadway, and there are dozens of choke points to favor even modestly armed defenders. While theoretically possible, a successful attack along this axis would truly require a commander combining the qualities of Rommel, Hannibal, and Vauban. []

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Another problem is the lack of self-propelled artillery, air defense, or personnel carrier assets currently in PDRY. These items play an integral part in Soviet-style combined arms operations. Aden has received only a few ZSU-23/4 tracked AAA systems and no SP artillery. The PDRY also does not have a compatible mix of armored personnel carriers sufficient to equip a "normal" Soviet brigade structure* without destroying the integrity of the presently widely dispersed Army. Specifically, South Yemen probably could field a relatively small force of 200-220 APCs on any given day. A mobile brigade would normally require at least half of these to be on the border and operational prior to initiating hostilities. []

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Soviet doctrine -- to which the Cubans probably subscribe -- calls for an unopposed armored force to maintain speeds of advance approaching 15 miles per hour while in convoy. Assuming they were able to reach this standard, it

*The Soviets usually do not organize in Brigades. South Yemen currently has 4 "Brigades" of Armor but these are actually about the size of US tank Companies. None are near the Oman border at present.

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would require nearly a week to preposition an adequate attack force along the Omani border, and another three days merely to drive from there to Muscat. This is a 'best-case' estimate which does not take account of inevitable mechanical and logistical problems which attend armor movements, and assumes no opposition whatsoever. Use of a single axis of advance would compound these difficulties and require a considerable combat service support effort -- to say nothing of the implicit danger to exposed flanks. While there is small probability the Omanis would strike such a force marshalling inside South Yemen, Muscat could and would resist any incursion into its own territory. In such an event it is nearly certain they would call for military support from the US, Britain, Saudi Arabia and probably Egypt. [redacted]

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From a strictly Yemeni viewpoint, any conventional military attack on Oman would mark a significant departure from their preferred tactics to date. A combination of urban terrorism with a renewal of unconventional warfare operations in Dhofar would be a more likely approach. A predominately Cuban force (perhaps with a veneer of PDRY participation) would not necessarily follow this line but very detailed planning and a significant influx of combat personnel (at least 2000) would be required. [redacted]

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Even a well-equipped, professionally officered and manned brigade, would almost certainly be too small a force for attacking Oman, in view of the inherent and historically proved advantages enjoyed by a defender with smaller forces-- well-placed and well-warned -- even if indifferently armed. An attacker willing to pay the price can, of course, always penetrate strong defenses, but the sheer depth of Omani territory and the glaring vulnerability of a single LOC would require several divisions, not a lone brigade. [redacted]

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Whatever the merits of the case for a Cuban-assisted attack, one thing is pretty clear: it would not be a tactical surprise. The numbers of troops and types of equipment involved could not long escape detection. [redacted]

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[redacted] Whether this reality militates against the conduct of such an operation might depend on broader issues than local military surprise.

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In summary, the potential impact of Cuba-PDRY military cooperation presently lies in the area of geo-strategic politics, but withal is a situation well worth continuing careful watch. [redacted]

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Cubans in Arabia? *Or, The Meaning of Strategy*

Edward N. Luttwak

WHEN Senator Richard Stone began asking questions about Soviet doings in Cuba during his ten minutes of allowed time on the very first morning of the SALT hearings last July, the staff experts sitting behind the semicircle of Senators of the Foreign Relations Committee exchanged despondent looks; some audibly groaned. There goes Stone, running for reelection in his Florida constituency full of refugees from Cuba, crassly misusing his ten minutes for crude electoral purposes, instead of questioning Defense Secretary Brown and Secretary of State Vance on the far greater issue before the committee: SALT itself, détente, the "capping" of the arms race, and so on.

The incisive precision of Stone's questions gave warning to the more alert that perhaps there was something new in the stale old Cuban issue after all. Weeks later, in the voice of another Senator, Frank Church, we all discovered that there was indeed something new, the now famous Soviet "brigade"—an armored formation that is inherently a combat unit but which can also be of use for training. During the weeks of confused non-crisis that followed, the groaning of the SALT experts did not cease; their own issue, the strategic issue *par excellence*, was being submerged by all the heated talk about a mere two or three thousand Russian troops, whose presence ninety, nine hundred, or nine thousand miles away was equally insignificant.

The experts, whose views have by now been reproduced in dozens of editorials, were categorical: SALT is of central importance, while the brigade is a purely symbolic issue, empty of meaning. At most a narrow and technical significance was seen in the episode: the belated and fortuitous discovery of the brigade was a reminder of the shortcomings of our highly technical approach to intelligence collection, in which the contribution of human sources has been reduced to very little by an institutionalized indiscretion that frightens

off potential agents. Otherwise, as far as the experts were concerned, it was downright odious that the discovery of the brigade should take on such great importance in the politics of SALT ratification merely because some demagogues could draw an utterly false analogy between the missiles of 1962 and the Soviet troops of 1979. By now we have heard this verdict from all those who aspire to expert status, from columnists of "moderate" views (on both sides of the SALT debate) to McGeorge Bundy writing in jocular fashion in the *New York Times*. And there matters seemingly rest, no doubt to the great satisfaction of the President, whose own speech on the subject merely restated that view before proceeding to urge the ratification of SALT, in characteristically extravagant language.

It is perhaps a natural consequence of our post-Vietnam predicament, in which we try to make foreign policy without a consensual world view, without a coherent scheme of our interests, and without even the vaguest sense of a national strategy, that our government policy-making and even our public debates on foreign affairs have themselves acquired a fragmentary character. We deal with issues *seriatim*, one by one as they arise, in reciprocal isolation, in a manner that we are pleased to call pragmatic but which is in fact merely episodic. Having no plan of concerted action ourselves, we imagine that others too are without plans; having no strategy ourselves, we imagine that others too conduct their policy in a fashion entirely unstrategical. Hence the episodic outlook. Thus, during the last two years we have had at least three inconclusive mini-crises on Cuban affairs: over the supply of a pair of Soviet-built submarines to the Cuban navy, over the stationing of Russian-piloted MiG-23's on the island, and lately over the brigade. In each case, the facts leaked out when the administration refused to publish forthrightly what even a willtully inadequate intelligence service had discovered. In each case, with visible reluctance, the administra-

importance of the episode. Of the Soviet submarines given to Cuba, we were told they were non-nuclear in propulsion, only two boats having been delivered, of which only one is capable of combat, and that a diesel-electric F-class boat—a familiar old-style torpedo-firing submarine and not at all a missile platform of strategic import. On the MiG-23's, reassurance had to wait awhile; an intelligence "investigation" had to be conducted to establish whether they were air-combat fighters, and therefore "defensive," since another MiG-23 version is known from Europe as a fighter-bomber armed with nuclear weapons, among other things. Eventually the administration announced that the aircraft newly arrived in Cuba were good MiG-23's and not bad ones. The revelation was treated by many with all the respect that high technicity still evokes, even though every schoolboy knows that nowadays all fighters are inherently fighter-bombers as well, the change being achieved by the simplest of field modifications.

Finally, in the case of the brigade the administration essentially accepted the Russian explanation, according to which it is a "training center," and the President even tried to capitalize upon our acceptance of the status quo. In his television speech, he attempted to suggest that the Russians had somehow made a concession by agreeing, if only tacitly, to use the brigade for training alone. The real question remained entirely unaddressed in the President's speech: if the brigade is a training center, whom is it training, and for what?

Thus, the separate facts, too visible to be ignored, were duly recorded, and dismissed, in piecemeal unstrategical fashion. Only two things have failed to emerge in the debate: over the last two or three years, Cuban forces have rather suddenly been upgraded with first-class weapons, after a long period in which Cuba received only obsolescent equipment. And, as an inevitable consequence, military facilities on the island have been transformed into a versatile support base for the Soviet Union. In between the advertised MiG-23's and F-class submarines there is now in place the connective tissue of a full panoply of forces, notably ground forces equipped with first-class T-62 battle tanks (thirty years newer than the T-34's which the Cubans used in Angola) as well as combat carriers of commensurate quality and modern battlefield air defenses. In air power, the Cubans, who until quite recently had only short-range interceptors of 1950's vintage, now fly late-model MiG-21's and their own MiG-23's. The Cuban navy has some thirty missile boats, in addition to

now stand ready to maintain Soviet submarines too. Equally, air-base facilities which can maintain late-model Soviet aircraft in Cuban service can offer the same service to late-model Soviet combat aircraft which retain their original insignias.

TO SEE things in the broad rather than as isolated fragments is the first and simplest rule of strategy; in this case, the exercise yields a fuller picture of the Cuban problem but gives no cause for any great or immediate alarm. Even as a military power of first-class quality, even if newly made so by recent Soviet decisions that might have purposes, Cuba is still small in quantity and cannot be a direct threat. As for the Soviet support base, its emergence is an unpleasant development but also not *prima facie* a significant threat.

The second rule of strategy, however, is to respect the *connection* among diverse things, and as soon as we apply that rule to Cuba it becomes clear that what is happening is of true and very great strategic importance, indeed more so than SALT, much more.

The primary connection that needs pursuing (and the only one to be pursued here) arises from the current upgrading of the Cuban intervention capability. In Africa, the Cubans have already been successful enough, but then neither in Angola nor in Ethiopia did they face effective armored forces or effective air power. In sub-Saharan Africa, even now, all the local military forces—except for those of South Africa—can still be defeated by infantry combat alone, with a few tanks and fighter-bombers thrown in largely for psychological effect. Disciplined infantry, commanded by officers with rudimentary company-level tactical skills, was amply sufficient to prevail in both Angola and Ethiopia.

But so long as their abilities did not exceed that level, the utility of the Cuban forces to the Soviet Union was sharply limited in geographic scope. Certainly Cuban infantry could not be used in those parts of the world where all serious ground combat must be armored-mobile combat, as in the Middle East. Writing in the *New York Times*, McGeorge Bundy cheerfully dismissed the training value of the Soviet armored brigade on the grounds that by now the Cubans have much more combat experience than the Russians. No doubt Mr. Bundy is a qualified expert on things more elevated than the operational art of warfare; he evidently does not know that to fight armor, highly specialized brigade-level command skills are essential, because it is only on that scale that battal-

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ions of tanks and of mechanized infantry, as well as self-propelled artillery and air-defense weapons, can all be integrated into a coordinated fighting force—such integration being the *sine qua non* of armored warfare. Nor is any amount of war experience of value as a substitute, if limited to infantry combat alone.

How about Cuba?

Detailed scrutiny of the alternatives reveals by elimination that there is in fact only one possible theater of operations for Cuban *armored* forces: the Arabian peninsula. Any Cuban intervention force would be quite marginal in the China-Vietnam theater or the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the case of the Arabian peninsula, on the other hand, the local forces are small enough (even if weapon inventories are large) to give full scope to a Cuban force. But in that theater the vast distances and the desert terrain mean that infantry forces are totally out of place; any intervention force must have armor-mobile capabilities. All other theaters of war are ruled out, either because any Cuban force would be too small, or because no armor would be needed (i.e., Central America).

Obviously has not looked at map

Wrong still too small for

WHEN the connection is next pursued into the region itself, we find an obvious entry point for a Cuban intervention force in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, or South Yemen to use that country's shorter and more truthful name. South Yemen is almost as much a Soviet client as Cuba, and for that reason alone unique among all the Arab lands. Yet, although it is indeed in Arabia, the country occupies the southwest corner of that vast peninsula, whereas the oil, and thus the U.S. interests that may accurately be called vital, are found in the opposite corner. What, then, would be the purpose of a Soviet-sponsored Cuban intervention?

To be sure, the Russians now control (and are expanding) the British-built airfield and logistic base in Aden, the main town of Yemen, and this has attracted much attention of late. But to connect the Aden base with the putative Cuban intervention force on this fact alone would clearly be arbitrary. In the first place, the Russians have not yet completed work on their base complex at Massawa, the Ethiopian port on the opposite side of the Red Sea. The Aden complex may therefore be servicing the Soviet effort in Ethiopia. Moreover, South Yemen itself has recently been in conflict with North Yemen, and the Soviet logistic build-up may simply be a necessary element in the Soviet Union's assistance to the "progressives" among the Yemenis.

But then two facts intervene to upset the calming thought that Russian ambitions may encom-

pass class-A equipment; the Yemenis are not receiving any of it, and indeed their troops are just barely able to use the simpler class-B materiel they already have (T-54 tanks, BTR-152 carriers, and 37mm old-style anti-aircraft guns). Moreover, and more decisively, we observe that far from becoming more intense, the conflict between the two Yemenis is being moderated—and by the Soviet Union. Indeed, the Russians are now reestablishing their influence in North Yemen (no doubt thanks to the agonized indecision of the Carter administration in providing help to the North when it was under attack).

Nor can the modern armored equipment being stocked in Aden be meant for the Ethiopians. With Somalia soundly defeated, they do not need such things at present. On the other side we observe that the class-A equipment now being stocked in Aden is identical to that of the Soviet brigade in Cuba, and therefore in turn to the brigade set that the Cubans are now being trained to use. At this point, the Cuba-Yemen connection ceases to be arbitrary.

The geographic objection remains. Not even a Rommel would dream of launching an armored offensive across more than a thousand miles of desert in a quixotic attempt to reach the "useful" parts of Arabia. Again, we are driven back to the explanation that the Soviet action in the Ethiopia-Yemen area has limited ambitions, the goal being merely to control the Red Sea passage. To be sure, this would already amply suffice to be of great concern to some, notably both Egypt and Israel as well as the Sudan, not to speak of all the users of the Suez Canal rather less directly. But a Soviet attempt to control the Red Sea is still the sort of threat that can easily be discounted in foreign-policy conversations on this side of the Atlantic.

UNFORTUNATELY, even such dubious comfort does not survive a somewhat wider scrutiny of the region. South Yemen shares a border with the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, a country ruled by a sheikh whose politics stand at the very opposite end of the Arab political spectrum from those of the rulers of South Yemen. A supporter of the Israel-Egypt peace, a man of moderate views in general, and invariably described as "pro-Western," the Sultan is now under fierce propaganda attack by the Iraqis and other radical Arab voices. Recently, Moscow's radio has joined the chorus, helpfully suggesting the assassination of the ruler.

The Sultanate has some oil, though not very much. But within its territory lies the Arab side of the straits of Hormuz, which control all sea access to the Persian Gulf; moreover, its northern

* At this point, the connection between the Cuban intervention force is being trained in armored warfare. The appropriate equipment is being stocked in South Yemen—the entry point. And the traditional-moderate Sultanate is a ready initial target, itself the perfect platform for a wider offensive that can be far more ambitious.

The pieces are on the chessboard; the operation could unfold at any time. With a revived Dhorfar movement providing the political camouflage of an internal revolt, and the chronically aggressive South Yemen government mounting a military attack in the guise of an intra-Arab fight, the Cubans could inject the *coup de grâce* of an armored threat which the small Omani army could not possibly resist. Naturally, useful political cover would also be forthcoming from voices familiar and near at hand: the one-man rule of the Sultan, it would be said, is anachronistic and the traditional regimes of Arabia are doomed anyway. Others would more pointedly ask why we must always support anti-democratic elements against the "people," and why we must always oppose "nationalism." And of course the very prospect of dying for Muscat and Oman would be invoked in ridicule.

It is painfully obvious, however, that if the United States, keeper of the West's long-range intervention capacity, does not act in time, the consequences would make SALT and all that seem like so much piffle. All the oil of Arabia would come under the direct threat of a radical Cuban-supported (and thus Soviet-sponsored) regime, whose mere emergence might well suffice to inspire radical seizures of power in the small Trucial sheikhdoms that have much oil. And of course now that Iran no longer acts as a protective force, there is no regional power able and willing to resist. Even if political warfare and the momentum of a radical victory close at hand did not in themselves suffice to undo the Saudi regime from within, war could do so from without. Some warfare would in any case be likely to begin immediately, if only because the long border between Oman and Saudi Arabia is poorly demarcated and in parts contested. And besides, right from the start, without any wider effect, political or military, the new leadership would control its side of the straits of Hormuz, through which all but a fraction of Persian Gulf oil must now transit. Narrow and easily blocked, the Hormuz channels are conventionally described, with perfect accuracy, as the jugular vein of the industrial democracies.

It is of course perfectly possible that the Russians, in upgrading Cuban forces, are only following the logic of military bureaucracies, having merely accelerated their efforts since January 1977 on the presumption—entirely natural—that Carter's decision to suspend photographic overflights of Cuba was an expression of American acquiescence. Similarly, the logistic build-up in Aden may be directed by the continued expansion of the Soviet naval and air long-range intervention capability—as well as by a parallel and again bureaucratically induced ambition to introduce modern armored warfare to South Yemen. (The Yemens, being miserably poor and spectacularly backward, could certainly use advancement, even if a *Panzer-Korps* is not perhaps their most pressing need.) Finally, the collateral emergence of a Soviet air-base complex in Afghanistan need not be necessarily connected with a politico-military seizure of Oman—even if it has been reported that the base is now insulated from the Afghan civil war by Soviet troops, and that it is being developed to accommodate long-range transports.

Such may be the true and diverse explanations of the diverse facts, and it may thus be an intellectual error to connect the separate elements into the picture of a coherent threat. But the exercise of strategic prudence is not a process identical with the disinterested search for the truth of others' intentions. The latter, in any case, are instantly changeable. Confronted as we are by the systematic preparation of all the necessary instruments of a Soviet-sponsored attack on our access to Persian Gulf oil, we cannot wait for the unfolding story to yield its natural truth, for by the time this happens it would be too late to respond.

The essential preliminary is to reveal to the American people the full dimensions of the threat, of which the brigade is merely the most easily visible element. The President conspicuously failed to do this in his speech on the brigade. Why? One may believe perhaps that in all the privileged information the White House has, there is some evidence compelling enough to refute the Cuba-Yemen-Oman connection here construed. But it will be noted that, in the President's speech, among all the words about Cuba and the Caribbean which preceded his peroration on the virtues of SALT, a little phrase was interjected about the need to strengthen American naval forces in the Indian Ocean, that is to say, off the coasts of Yemen and Oman. Suitable inquiries elicited the expected: the President's

experts on foreign affairs had duly construed the facts as they have been construed here, for indeed the facts cannot reasonably be interpreted otherwise. And accordingly they wanted to write the speech as an announcement of an American reaction as wide-ranging and energetic as the emergent threat already is. But the President's experts on foreign matters were outweighed by those whose concerns are more immediate and indeed electoral; these are men who know not of Muscat or Oman and who are distant even from an elementary sense of the national interest overseas. Thus the domestic political imperative of SALT ratification easily displaced the exercise of a minimal strategic prudence.

Potentially momentous in itself, the failure to confront the Cuba-Yemen-Oman connection is of

wider significance still as a reminder of the most pervasive dysfunction of our foreign policy as a whole. What has been revealed as empty of strategic significance is not the Soviet brigade in Cuba, but rather the obsessive pursuit of the cumbersome legalisms of SALT at a time when our chief adversary is ceaselessly maneuvering to prevail. While our best minds use their energies to explain away all that Moscow tries to do, in Moscow a machine of imperial ambition is at work, whose goal is to exploit all our points of weakness around the world. In the case of the Cuba-Yemen-Oman connection, as in larger things, our failure of strategy is not of an intellectual order; it is, rather, political. It is the politics of willful inadvertence that are obscuring the need to confront threats more and more ominous.